

## **Testimony of Hartford Schools Superintendent**

**Dr. Beth Schiavino-Narvaez**

**Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly**

**Wednesday, March 4, 2015**

Chairwoman Bye, Chairwoman Walker; Vice Chairs, Senator Hartley and Representative Genga; Ranking members Senator Kane and Representative Ziobron and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee.

I am Dr. Beth Schiavino-Narvaez, Superintendent of Hartford Public Schools.

I, first of all, want to recognize the leadership that both Governor Malloy and the members of this committee are showing in trying close a projected \$1.3 billion deficit for the coming fiscal year in the most painless way possible.

With that being said, we have concerns over a number of proposed funding reductions and complete cuts that, if enacted, would adversely affect Hartford Public Schools. Rather than enumerate them all, we want to focus on three in particular: Extended Day Grants, which are being eliminated entirely; the Commissioner's Network, which is slated to lose 27% of its funding; and the Healthy Foods Initiative, which is also being eliminated entirely.

Through Extended Day Grants, funded through the Connecticut Department of Education, we awarded 10 grants to community-based organizations that are servicing about 950 students during non-instructional hours at 14 schools. The loss to our district in the coming fiscal year of \$404,347 would indeed be a travesty.

Extended School Hour programs serve as integral partners in our district's quest to provide every student with a high quality educational experience. Students are often as likely to discover their talents and their true calling in an Extended School Hours program, as they are in a classroom.

The programs provide opportunities for academic improvement, including instructional services to help students meet state and local performance standards. They also offer a range of activities designed to spark students' imaginations and promote self-discovery through educational enrichment, arts, recreation, socialization, cultural enrichment, service learning, character education, and leadership development activities.

As you may know, two Hartford Public Schools – Milner Elementary and Clark Elementary -- have been accepted since 2012 into the Commissioner's Network, through which they receive additional funds set aside by the legislature to improve student achievement at Connecticut's lowest performing schools.

The funding is supposed to be renewed for three years, so long as the schools remain faithful to a turnaround strategy, designed under state supervision, that includes up to 34 additional days of instructional time, after-school programming aligned to instruction; and supports for a growing population of English Language Learners.

Our Commissioner's Network work at Clark and Milner, though still in its infancy, held a promise of producing great results. A 27% reduction in funding would deal a severe setback to this effort. Both are neighborhood schools that were severely underfunded prior to entering the Commissioner's Network.

Finally, I would like to address the proposal to eliminate 4.8 million dollars in funding for the Healthy Food Certification program that provides funds to school districts based on the total number of lunches served during the prior school year.

Approximately 56% of our students live in households that receive SNAP benefits formerly known as food stamps. That means their families can have a gross income of no more than \$597 per week to qualify for SNAP benefits. These guidelines make it challenging for any household to maintain a food budget that includes nutrient foods needed for health promotion and disease prevention. School meals in Hartford are often what help these families to expand access to foods that promote health.

The funding we receive, approximately \$325,000 annually, represents 32.5% of our total fresh produce budget. As with most School Food Service Programs, we need to operate on a balanced budget regardless of financial constraints, which is always challenging. Historically, one of the ways school districts balance their food service budgets is to sell additional snack foods that do not meet USDA guidelines. Eliminating Healthy Food Certification program may require selling additional snack foods district-wide to balance our budget. My fear is that if we decrease the fruit and vegetable offerings and increase the snacks, students will begin to substitute snacks for lunch, which will have an overall negative impact on their health.

When Healthy Food Certification was adopted by the legislature in 2006, it made Connecticut a national leader in establishing high nutrition standards for food sold in schools. Eliminating the program is a disservice to the health and well being of students in Hartford as well as to the state.

The abovementioned items, plus several other decreases and cuts that have been proposed, represent a potential loss of nearly \$2 million for Hartford children, which on top of the \$31.4 million that we lose annually due to the historic underfunding of ECS and other entitlement programs will seriously restrict our efforts to provide every student with a high quality educational experience. I strongly urge you to reject these budget reduction proposals.